

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

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• Rachel W. Coffin, Editor •

Week of April 29, 1957

1957 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres in Other Years

*Original Reviews Appeared
In These Volumes*

1956 Vol.

Stage Play	Page
Apple Cart (The)	258
*Auntie Mame	229
*Bells Are Ringing	182
Candide	176
Girls of Summer	197
Good Woman of Setzuan (The)	161
*Happiest Millionaire (The)	193
*Happy Hunting	166
*Li'l Abner	202
*Long Day's Journey Into Night	217
Macbeth	237
*Major Barbara	233
*Middle of the Night	370
Mr. Wonderful	339
*Most Happy Fella (The)	308
*My Fair Lady	345
Reluctant Debutante (The)	269
Richard II	253
Romeo and Juliet	250
Saint Joan	285
*Separate Tables	246
Speaking of Murder	157
Troilus and Cressida	149
Uncle Willie	154

1955 Vol.

*Dama Yankees	310
*Diary of Anne Frank (The)	257
*Inherit the Wind	322
Matchmaker (The)	194
*No Time for Sergeants	238

*Asterisks indicate shows scheduled
to play week of April 29, 1957

1957 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres During 1957

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	Page	Stage Play	Page
Adieux (Les)	337	Measure for Measure	381
*Brigadoon	305	Misanthrope (Le)	359
Chien du Jardinier (Le)	337	Nuits de la Colere (Les)	351
Christophe Colomb	369	*Orpheus Descending	310
Clearing in the Woods (A)	393	*Potting Shed (The)	372
Duchess of Malfi (The)	313	*Shinbone Alley	292
Eugenia	366	Sin of Pat Muldoon (The)	318
Feu la Mere de Madame	351	Small War on Murray Hill	397
*First Gentleman (The)	286	Taming of the Shrew (The)	334
Good as Gold	321	*Tunnel of Love (The)	347
Hidden River (The)	378	*Visit to a Small Planet (A)	356
Hide and Seek	301	Volpone	361
*Hole in the Head (A)	330	Waiting for Godot	385
*Holiday for Lovers	342	*Waltz of the Toreadors (The)	390
*Hotel Paradiso	298	*Ziegfeld Follies	327
Intermezzo	345		

Critics' Circle Award..... 295

Theatre Openings

"The First Gentleman"

*Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of April 29, 1957

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST

NEW YORK MIRROR

NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The First Gentleman"

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

April 26, 1957

THEATER

'The First Gentleman'

By WALTER KERR

JUST a few minutes before the final curtain comes down on Norman Ginsbury's pageant of a tatterdemalion royalty going gilt-edged to seed, the massive and majestic Walter Slezak stands monumentally poised in mountainous profile while his corset strings are yanked tight by no fewer than five valets. Two hold his wrists and lunge forward; the remainder billow to the rear, like so many tugboats guiding the Queen Mary into dock. Between the crews Mr. Slezak, as a Regent of England who has loved his port, his porter, and a sizable portion of the female population, heaves in prayerful agony. The agony and Mr. Slezak are splendid.

Indeed this extraordinarily agile behemoth of an actor has been having a jolly bout with the Muse all evening. He has breezed on stage in top hat and scarlet hunting-coat to explain that he has just "cantered over" to re-do his daughter's lodgings. He has melted himself onto a rocking-horse in the same daughter's nursery to swoop forward and back in deep spiritual contemplation. He has snapped off many a curt and casual quip ("Holland is a

pleasant country, full of bulbs") with his lips pursed, his nose wrinkled up like a satisfied rabbit's, and his eyes barely concealing his refined disgust. Every trailing Oriental robe and every tight white waistcoat becomes him.

If only author Ginsbury and director Tyrone Guthrie had been able to squeeze the random and rather double-faced play into an equally effective corset! "The First Gentleman" is, alternately, a thing of two moods. There is the crisp, snappish, comic-Valentine world of something close to high farce in which a resplendent ruler of the realm marches in stately progress to an official balcony, where he is promptly received by mighty boos from the populace. In this same vein, Mr. Slezak manages to sit on an available Bishop, mistake a playful slap from his mistress for an assault on the part of his footman, and announce "It needs time—I must think" only to rap out his answer immediately.

Against the generally engaging effrontery of this sort of historical cartooning the producers have occasionally permitted a much more somber note to be

sounded. During the second act, when a Princess is appealing to her cast-off mother to save her from an unwanted marriage, Isobel Elsom presents us briefly with a mother who sports a garish red wig, a rose at her breast, and a bottle under the nearest coverlet. Midway through the scene this excellent actress pauses, rips off the wig to reveal a forlorn grey head, and settles down into a harrowing account of her own politically-arranged wedding night.

Again, deep in the last act, the brisk and two-dimensional frivolity pauses to record an untimely death. The Princess, given her true love at last, has died in child-birth—and we are present for the shock to a family and a kingdom. These dabbings with death and personal disaster are effectively managed, in themselves. But we are not really ready for them, so blandly have the surrounding japeries been played. And they have the further unhappy result of making the japeries seem conscienceless and paper-thin by comparison. "The First Gentleman" has not elected to stand on a single platform; and the supports give.

Co-producer Ralph Alswang has served engagingly as his own designer, scattering bear-skin rugs, Oriental fire-screens, and what seems like tons of Brighton gingerbread over the Belasco stage. Inga Swenson is an affecting Princess, especially when she is hysterically pouring wine for all comers in the giddy excitement of a false freedom. Peter Donat, Robert Goodier, Clarence Derwent, and Guy Spaul stride through the Carl-

"THE FIRST GENTLEMAN"

Play in three acts by Norman Ginsbury; staged by Tyrone Guthrie; scenery and lighting by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Motley; presented by Alexander H. Cohen and Mr. Alswang in association with Arthur C. Twitchell, Jr., at the Belasco Theatre, April 25, 1957.

The cast:
Cornelia Knight... Dorothy Sands
Princess Charlotte... Inga Swenson
Henry Bringham... Wesley Addy
Edward, Duke of Kent.....

Robert Goodier
Bishop of Salisbury.....
Clarence Derwent
Prince Regent of England....

Walter Slezak
Lady Conyngham... Helen Burns
Charlotte... Maud Scheerer
Princess Augusta... Meg Wylie
Princess Elizabeth... Frances Greet
Princess Mary... Joyce Ballou
William... John Milligan
Prince Leopold... Peter Donat
Caroline... Isobel Elsom
Servant to Caroline, James Neylin
Servant in Claremont House....

Phena Darner
Mrs. Griffiths... Ludi Claire
Sir Richard Croft... Guy Spaul
Prince Regent's Dresser...
Le Roi Operti

ton House corridors most helpfully.

"He is not of the blood royal," mutters an old harridan of a Queen as she spears a section of apple and stuffs it into her mouth. For all the color and occasional comic life of its incidents, the play lacks a clear lineage, too.

Daily Mirror

April 26, 1957

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'First Gentleman' Is Interesting, But...

• This sumptuous production about the horrible Hanoverians fails to catch fire.

In "The First Gentleman," Norman Ginsbury has penned a study of some of the horrible Hanoverians. He is particularly interested in the Prince Regent who governed England after his father, George III, had gone insane. It was that George whose arrogance and stupidity cost England the American colonies.

Though the Prince Regent wasn't exactly crazy, he was vain, selfish, gross and greedy. He drove his wife, the Princess of Wales, to drink and eventual

exile on the continent. He sought to marry his daughter, the pretty and popular Princess Charlotte, to the rich though not overly bright William of Orange.

BUT CHARLOTTE, who had a mind of her own, would accept no suitor but Leopold of Saxe-Coburg. After stubbornly defying her petulant papa for more than a year, the beaten ruler acceded to her marital wishes. But Charlotte died after delivering a still-born Prince. Leopold was to become King of Belgium. And the infant Victoria, daughter of the Duke of Kent, was on her way to the throne, as William IV had no legitimate heirs.

"The First Gentleman" runs the gamut from burlesque humor to tragedy.

Alexander H. Cohen and Ralph Alswang have given the historical play a sumptuous production. Alswang's settings and Motley's costumes could grace any lavish musical. Tyrone Guthrie's direction, we think, fails to catch the gusto of the gauche Hanoverians in the first two acts, though it does capture the sardonic mood of the last one.

WALTER SLEZAK is excellent as the plump peacock who preens

his fine feathers, to the disgust of the populace.

Inga Swenson, whom we last heard singing in "New Faces of 1956," is a beautiful, high-spirited and determined Princess Charlotte.

Helen Burns, Maud Scheerer, Clarence Derwent, Robert Goodier, Wesley Addy, Dorothy Sands, Peter Donat, Guy Spaul and John Milligan make the most of their opportunities.

"THE FIRST GENTLEMAN" is an interesting play about a fascinating period in English history. It has the materials for an amusing and cynical commentary on the profligate magnificence of an era, as glimpsed through the eyes of their footmen and backstairs maids. But Ginsbury has failed to use them with the necessary skill.

Characters are outlined rather than developed. They're calculated to drive you to your Trevelyan after you leave the Belasco Theatre.



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

April 26, 1957

Monarch of All He Can Wear

By TOM DONNELLY.

As regards "The First Gentleman" at the Belasco it is perhaps best, or at any rate simplest, to begin with a summation and proceed with the arguments. On the whole I found the evening an agreeable one.

Norman Ginsbury has assembled one of those loosely joined historical pageants (1814-1819) with the prince regent who became King George IV front and center most of the time. Since the prince regent was a foolish and ineffectual man, concerned chiefly with

idle pleasures and gorgeous clothes, "The First Gentleman" is a series of glimpses of a gilded cork bobbing about on a sea of satin.

Petty Triumphs.

The prince regent's triumphs are petty ones. He fights delaying actions and loses; he cannot prevent his spirited daughter from marrying the poor but honorable prince of her choice, instead of the rich but vapid one of her father's, and playwright Ginsbury is not sufficiently witty or original to shape his random materials to any compelling ironic design, or to bring off the difficult feat of giving us a deeply etched portrait of a superficial monarch.

As a light sketch of a royal nonentity, however, "The First Gentleman" has its decided merits. The preliminaries are dull, but the pageant increases in interest as it moves along, and if the various segments of the second and third acts are not uniformly effective, all of them have their moments, and some of them are first-rate theater.

Like a Fat Cat.

Walter Slezak makes a wonderful show of himself in the title role. A cat may look at a king, they say. Mr. Slezak suggests a plump cat, stuffed with cream, occupying the very throne.

The prince regent flounces about with ripe enthusiasm, constantly preening himself on his velvets and ruffles and jewels. He admires his own taste extravagantly. The rebellious princess has only to express approval of the hideous pseudo-Chinese dining pavilion he has had constructed and he is plying her with chocolate mousse, the picture of idiot pride.

The prince regent, in quarrelsome mood, drops in on the princess' quarters, sits on a rocking horse, and is immediately lost in the game of striking heroic poses, a most imperfect knight riding off to battle. The princess dies in

childbirth, and her father's genuine grief can barely make itself felt through his giddy anticipation of a really spectacular funeral. The prince regent's mother, a harpy painted like an Easter egg, rebukes her son, and he sits in the sulky attitude of an enormous child unfairly called to judgment.

Excellent Support.

In all this Mr. Slezak puts on a superior vaudeville: broad, brilliantly colored, ablaze with comic energy. In his final scene the actor cuts through the marvelous greasepaint surface to a worn and befuddled creature of real flesh and blood, painfully corseted, hopelessly bored, and utterly defeated.

The supporting artists are excellent. Inga Swenson is charming as the princess in her preponderantly vivacious moods, and in her occasional quiet ones. As the prince regent's discarded wife, a distracted woman reduced to alcoholism, shabby affairs with servants, and fantasies of revenge, Isobel Elsom is remarkably touching. The single scene in which she appears is the best in the play.

Tyrone Guthrie's direction is, by and large, expert, and I have nothing but praise for Ralph Alswang's prodigal settings and the sumptuous costumes by Motley.

New York Post

April 26, 1957

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Portrait of a Royal Bounder

The Prince Regent, who later became England's King George IV, was a colorful but not very interesting man, and I suppose it is natural that a play about him should be colorful but not very interesting. No doubt Bernard Shaw could have made him a fascinating and intellectually

witty stage figure, but Norman Ginsbury, author of "The First Gentleman," which opened last night at the Belasco Theater, is at least more faithful to the facts of life, history and character, and his biographical drama about five years in the Hanoverian's career must pay the resulting penalty.

It is not that "The First Gentleman" is without its virtues. It has a production which is not only lavish but handsome and even affectionate, with striking, picturesque and seemingly authentic period settings by Ralph Alswang and vivid costumes by Motley. There is a carefully detailed, slyly amusing and realis-

tically candid performance by Walter Slezak in the title role of the fatuous, stupid, selfish and superficially charming Regent. There is the unfailing Isobel Elsom with one scene which she plays admirably, and there is a lovely portrayal of a princess by Inga Swenson.

Since Miss Swenson is a virtual newcomer in this vicinity, who has been seen only in a revue and an off-Broadway "Twelfth Night," it may appear simply newsworthy to go into detail about her. But it is not merely her freshness nor her per-

sonal beauty that entitles her to such consideration. It is because her characterization of the spirited but affectionate daughter of the Regent, who refuses to surrender to her father and marry the man of his choice, is lovely and immensely moving, and gives the play a stirring quality of deeply-felt emotion that it otherwise lacks.

Save for her moving performance, and Miss Elsom's brief but brilliant scene as the ill-used, drink-sodden and pathetic wife of the Regent, "The First Gentleman" is remarkably without dramatic power. Although it deals largely with the daughter's revolt against her father's determination to marry her to a man she dislikes, its preoccupation is less with the emotional aspects of the situation than with the character of the vapid and selfish George. And it seems a shame, because such a scene as the girl's unknowing farewell to her husband is far more interesting.

Played by Mr. Slezak with a proper eye to the eccentricities of the Regent, the title character certainly emerges as a colorful and fairly amusing fellow. He is

especially entertaining in his effort to pose as an expert on art and to add a touch of Chinese culture to his Pavilion in Brighton. But, for all of his comic oddities, George was basically a clod, and he remains a clod, despite Mr. Slezak's ingenious acting, and the play cannot escape the results of that cloddishness. His picturesque peculiarities only partly conceal the fact that the Prince was also a bore.

There are a number of well-acted small roles in "The First Gentleman." Maud Scheerer is amusing and believable as the Regent's vulgar mother, and Dorothy Sands is excellent as the faithful friend of the unhappy Princess. Clarence Derwent as an insufferable Bishop, Wesley Addy as an attorney, Helen Burns as George's mistress, and Robert Goodier as the Duke of York, father of a baby the Regent reluctantly allows to be christened Victoria, are particularly helpful. But, despite Miss Swenson's touching performance, the play is the too-realistic portrait of a lump.

"The First Gentleman"—continued

Journal  American

April 26, 1957

Slezak in Whale of a Part

By JOHN McCLAIN

WALTER SLEZAK, a blond hippopotamus who has recently devoted himself to silly roles in musicals, last night emerged in "The First Gentleman," a new play which opened at the Belasco, as a performer of brilliant scope and persuasion. It is a whale of a part (only a semi-whale could attempt it); he dominates the evening from curtain's rise to fall, and he displays an incredible talent for almost every emotion from the broadest farce to sheer tragedy.

This historical consideration of the life of King George III's son, the Prince Regent, paints a brilliant picture of the excesses and fripperies of royalty in the days when the King was consigned to a laughing academy and the land was rather loosely ruled by Charlotte, his Queen. As her son, the Regent, Slezak gives us a portrait of a vain and self-indulgent sensualist, an over-stuffed voluptuary whose chief ambition is to banish his immediate family to make way for his unpopular accession to the throne.

Historical accuracy has given way at times in the interest of dramatic impact, but it must be agreed that author Norman Ginsbury has achieved a suspenseful narrative which still retains the atmosphere of the era, and when he has chosen to embroider, he has done so artistically.

Cast Excellent

This is an example of true

craftsmanship in the delineation of a character, both in writing and performance. The Regent is a ridiculous megalomaniac, but before the show is minutes old we are laughing for him and at him. And when tragedy finally overtakes him, we feel the sincere sympathy produced when disaster falls the village idiot.

The large cast supporting Slezak is excellent. There is an

unusually bright and beguiling contribution by Inga Swenson, as Princess Charlotte; she is as decorative as any lass on the boards this season, and a truly capable actress.

Dorothy Sands, as her companion, gives one of her notably brittle and competent performances; Isobel Elsom is both tragic and hilarious as the neglected wife of the Regent; Maud Sheerer has a frolic in the role of Charlotte, the Queen; Peter Donat, playing Prince Leopold, who is in love with the Princess, is a graceful and very handsome swain. Other noteworthy efforts are supplied by Clarence Derwent, Helen Burns, Robert Goodier, Wesley Addy and Guy Spaul.

There is still another star in the play: Motley, who designed the costumes. Never in recent history—probably in all theatrical history—has so much silk, satin, brocade and braid been draped over a single human torso.

Other royal figures may have

had more changes, some even more lavish, but yard-for-yard Slezak could give Robert Morley or Toots Shor enough material from the tail of one coat to keep them warm for the Winter. The costumes are not only enormous, they're beautiful.

In a strange way that has a lot to do with the successful mood of the show, Ralph Alswang's six wonderfully effective sets match the pageantry of the costumes; the producers, of whom Mr. Alswang is one, have spared nothing to give the property the mounting it deserves.

"The First Gentleman" is large and luxurious, loaded with gusto and good humor. It is a great tribute to the talents of Walter Slezak, and it should take care of his grocery bill (an item just short of the 1957 Navy Appropriations figures) as long as his appetite holds out.

DAILY NEWS

April 26, 1957

'The First Gentleman' a Lavish Historical Play at the Belasco

By JOHN CHAPMAN

No more fitting theatre than the Belasco could have been found for last evening's premiere of "The First Gentleman." Here was a playhouse haunted by Belasco even before Belasco died—a theatre dedicated to exotic lavishness. And here, last evening, was the most lavish dramatic production of the season—an affair panoplied with scenery, strewn with costumes and densely populated by actors.

The play, by Norman Ginsbury, an English dramatist, is a historical comedy with a bitter-sweet ending—and the ending is much the best part of it, for in the last few moments emotion and sentiment are allowed to dominate an otherwise routine costume romance.

The First Gentleman of the

title is the Prince Regent of England, who took over the ruling of the most troublesome island which ever shouldered itself out of the sea when his father, George III, took leave of his mind. (Later the Prince Regent became George IV, but the play does not concern itself with this period of history.)

Parallels History

If you want a resplendent prince—a gourmet, an art collector, a dilettante and a petty tyrant—you couldn't do better than cast Walter Slezak in the

role, and Slezak is the star at the Belasco. Besides being a smart and ingratiating comedian, he is imposing to look at. No actor has had so much sticking out in front since Mae West followed herself around in "Diamond Lil" and "Catherine Was Great."

Ginsbury's story probably parallels history. The Prince Regent wants his daughter, Charlotte, to marry the Prince of Orange. But she don't wanna. She loves Prince Leopold, of Saxe-Coburg. The old boy gives in and these two wed, and soon a new heir to the throne of England is apparent. However, Charlotte dies in childbirth and her son is still-born, and thus it was that the child of another branch of the family, Victoria, became ruler of Troublesome Island.

Resplendent Finale

Two-thirds of "The First Gentleman" are a leisurely but richly panoplied approach to the meat of the play—Charlotte's and Leopold's short time of bliss and the Prince Regent's grief over the ultimate tragedy. The final scene, in which the Prince Regent is corseted, dressed, bejeweled and be-ribboned for the christening of his niece, Victoria, is most impressive visually and quite impressive emotionally.

Slezak is fine. So are Inga Swenson, a very beautiful Charlotte, and Peter Donat, her suitor and husband. There are excellent character roles played by Isobel Elsom, Dorothy Sands, Clarence Derwent, Maud Scheerer, Wesley Addy, Guy Spaul and a half-dozen others. The settings, by Ralph Alswang, and the costumes, by Motley, are superb.

"The First Gentleman" is an eye-ful. As a play, it falls short of another historical romance, "Victoria Regina," because it begins telling the real story too late in the evening. But it is something to see, considering all the one-set, five-character things that Broadway has been tossing us these last few years.

The New York Times

April 26, 1957

Theatre: Costume Play

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALTHOUGH Norman Ginsbury has written a small play in "The First Gentleman," acted at the Belasco last evening, he has some big people on his side.

Tyrone Guthrie, a director of gigantic height, has attended to the staging. Walter Slezak, an actor of gigantic girth, plays the part of the Prince Regent, the first gentleman of Europe. Since the costume-design house with the trade name of Motley consists of women, one must not make personal remarks. But it is safe to say that the women must have needed the assistance of bruisers to carry the royal costumes from the racks to the stage. Everything about "The First Gentleman" is done on a grand scale.

Everything except the script, that is. For Mr. Ginsbury

has written a conventional costume play about the notorious profligate who was Prince Regent during the years when his father, George III, was too mad to rule England. Under the panoply of the palaces, "The First Gentleman" chronicles the attempt the Prince Regent makes to arrange the marriage of his daughter, Charlotte.

He is a fatuous and dissipated tyrant. But she has as strong a mind as he has. Finally she succeeds in marrying an impecunious prince of her own choosing. In the second half of the play there are two moving scenes between an overbearing father and a high-spirited daughter. Mr. Slezak and Inga Swenson play the parts with skill, charm and force. During these tender moments, "The First Gentleman" touches on real relationships that generate real feeling.

But most of "The First Gentleman" consists of the ceremony and scandal of life inside the palaces of the Regent more than a century ago. There is a type of costume drama that consists of royalty and high society exploding through doors guarded by flunkies into a room full of viands, wines and jewelled decorations. For the most part, "The First Gentleman" is in that true-romances style, thrilled by the spectacle of royalty, titillated by the squalid follies of the great.

Since Mr. Guthrie likes a great show in the theatre, he has set about doing what he can to compensate for smallness of spirit by grandeur of production. Ralph Alswang's scenery does look a little grubby, more in the tone of "The Student Prince" than "Victoria Regina." But the Motley girls have piled one dazzling costume on the other, bankrupting the King's exchequer in the last scene when they dress the Prince Regent in robes of incomparable splendor. Some of the regency furniture used on the stage would also make a museum director envious.

Some good actors help to keep up royal appearances.

Isobel Elsom as an embittered queen; Peter Donat as the one genuine human being in a palace of courtiers; Clarence Derwent as a pedantic bishop; Dorothy Sands as the princess' attendant; Wesley Addy as her legal adviser; Helen Burns as the Regent's mistress—give alert performances. As the Princess, Miss Swenson plays with remarkable temperament and variety. She brings an interesting character wholly alive in mercurial acting.

But "The First Gentleman" is Mr. Slezak's holiday. If Mr. Slezak ever walked on the stage and behaved like an ordinary person, you could be sure that he was acting. But his bountiful portrait of a charming, subtly-mocking Prince with bland voice and witty eyes, with panache and drollery, is not a fruit of The Method. It is a personal creation that is lovable because it is genuine. There is nothing artful in it except the sense of humor that keeps the rolling figure in balance. Some technique too, of course.

"The First Gentleman" is no match for Mr. Slezak. The author does not have his freedom of spirit.

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